

Commentary

The Retired Husband Syndrome

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The retired husband syndrome has become a realistic diagnosis that is found to characterize the symptoms of some of my female patients in the age bracket of 50 to 65 years. In this article I describe the numerous complaints that have been presented to me by women whose husbands have retired.

Retirement

Retirement refers to the discontinuance of a man's normal work habits from 8 AM to 5 PM five days a week and the filling of those hours with pleasurable activities such as fishing, hunting, golfing, gardening or tennis, or engaging in some pleasurable hobby (Figure 1).

During the first years of marriage, each partner tries to please the other by socializing, dining out, going to movies and engaging in recreation of all types, but as a husband becomes successful and takes on more responsibilities at work, he has less time for his wife and loses interest in many of the niceties they formerly enjoyed. She then replaces this lack of attention by seeking out her own recreation, such as bridge, gardening, golfing, tennis or club, volunteer or church work. She becomes dependent on these as a part of her day-to-day living and happiness. As children begin arriving, many of these extracurricular activities are dropped and the former leisure time is replaced with the finalities of raising a family. The husband contributes little because he is busy being successful—sometimes traveling for days and often absent from home from early morning to late evening. When he arrives home, his mood is often one of silence because of his preoccupation with the day's activities, or he often finds time to depreciate or complain of her day's unproductiveness. His demeaning attitude can be tolerated because he is around the home for only short periods of time. But, lo and behold, now he is retired!

As the children came, so they also left. When the rooms are vacated and the couple is again just two, she once more finds spare time to seek out her friends who are also left with fewer responsibilities, and together they take up pleasurable pastimes during their leisure.

With retirement comes a whole new life for both

spouses. His is one of finding leasurable activities while hers becomes more involved with details. When a husband retires from his routine workday, his whole attitude toward life turns to doing what he pleases whenever he chooses to do it.

She had never—in 35 or more years of marriage—been aware of the unpleasant personality that suddenly now becomes evident (Figure 2). His normal aggressiveness has now become that of ruling sovereignty; yet, in some cases his dependency takes a major portion of her previously free time. "There is no retirement for me," she exclaims. "In fact, picking up around the house, cleaning the ashtrays and picking up the beer bottles all day make my work load much worse than it was before."

I have frequently heard wives rage with such allegations as, "I am going nuts," "I want to scream," "He is under my feet all the time," "He is driving me crazy," "I'm nervous" or "I can't sleep." These emotional statements are frequently associated with symptoms such as tension headaches, depression, agitation, palpitations, gas, bloating, muscle aches and so forth. Not infrequently a woman will state that previous social functions, such as playing bridge, golfing or meeting with her friends, have had to cease because of his demands for her attention. Even grocery shopping means accompanying her husband and being hit in the heels with a grocery cart.

Then comes the kitchen scene with such complaints as, "Since his retirement, my husband has taken up residence in my kitchen" (Figure 3).

He literally takes over my only domicile and wants to cook or direct the way I cook, and you can't imagine the disarray that can occur. You never saw so many dirty dishes or such unpalatable food in your life. I'm left with cleaning the dishes and trying to salvage a \$1.10 dinner out of \$21 worth of food, much of which must be discarded. Everything is fried to a charcoal black. His salads are made from every conceivable vegetable and in quantities to fill a washtub. There is enough Roquefort cheese in the salad dressing to strangle an alligator. If he is making breakfast, his hotcakes (which correctly should be called hot rocks) are again served with fried potatoes and eggs. The cracking of eggs is something else. Crushing them with his hands (as presumably he has seen some chef do) always results in picking out egg shell from the food while we attempt to eat it, or throwing the whole damned thing away.

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Another harried wife will complain that after breakfast, her husband plants himself in a large chair in the living room, presumably to read the paper, but turns on the television so loud that the walls shake (Figure 4). By the time she finishes cleaning the kitchen, he has settled down in his easy chair, sound asleep, the newspaper scattered all over the floor. She has little time to quickly clean the living room, make the beds and get to her bridge club by 11 AM. No amount of cajoling can get him out of his chair or get his feet off the newspaper. His slippers are lying in the middle of the room. Cigarette butts and the smell of smoke are everywhere. Finally, in disgust, she gives up, dresses and gets ready to leave, when suddenly he wakes up and wants her to go shopping with him. On questioning, he says, "Well, I want to pick out some fishing equipment." As you might know, she (Figure 5) did not go to her club but was escorted from one sports equipment store to another. In a similar vein, another harassed woman came in with a great many physical complaints and, after some discussion, I asked her when her husband had retired. With this, she flew into a

rage and began to weep, stating that when she married her husband, she agreed it would be for better or for worse, but never realized it would be for retirement! She went on to elucidate, "He wants me with him every minute (Figure 6). I can't even go to the bathroom without his following. He bought a camper, and I am supposed to go with him every day that he wants to go in that thing—sometimes for several days at a time. After one or two days in this camper, I am mighty tired of picking up his hat to find a place to sit down. To enter the restroom, I must enter sideways, and when inside with the door closed, worry about how in tarnation I will squeeze back out." This closeness is not conducive to a good mental attitude, and she becomes more and more angry because her friends are enjoying a hand of bridge or game of golf, and here she finds herself looking at the closed-in walls of a trailer.

Another aspect that is frequently related by a patient is that the man wants to do all the shopping for food, but on her budget (Figure 7). If she suggests a larger allowance for shopping, he goes into a fit of rage. "I am beside myself," she decries. "I have goosebumps, headaches, dizziness, palpitations and depression."

Another wife protests, "I am so nervous I don't know what to do. Yesterday I wanted to do some shopping for myself, but he insisted he drive me downtown (Figure 8). After leaving me at the store, he announced he would pick me up after driving around the block once. In that time frame it was impossible to even look at fashion apparel, let alone try on for size, or make a wise selection." Another complains with great agitation and obvious depression and tears that since her husband's retirement, he has become an alcoholic (Figure 9). His verbal abuse, total lease on her time and demand for daily sex have produced depression, headaches, rectalgia and total denouncement of sex. Rather than being a pillar in the church, she views herself as only a rug to be thrown about. Until his retirement, she had never been so vividly aware that her husband had an evil or uncontrollable

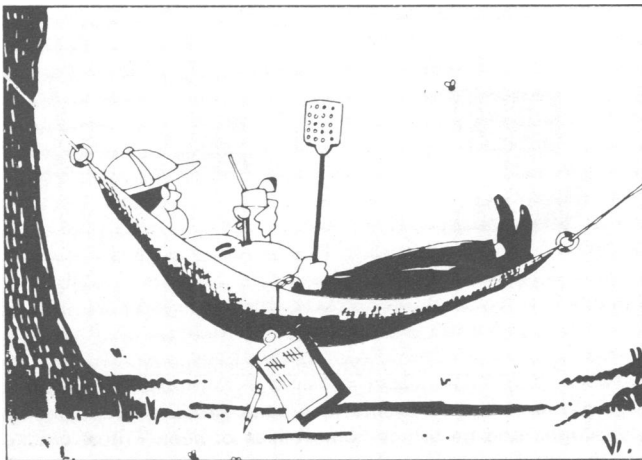


Figure 1.—Retirement for many is filling his day with what he calls *pleasurable* activity.



Figure 2.—She had never been aware of the unpleasant personality that has suddenly become evident.



Figure 3.—"Since his retirement, my husband has taken up residence in my kitchen—you can't imagine the disarray that can occur."

COMMENTARY



Figure 4.—"My husband plants himself in a chair in the living room and, after leaving papers and books strewn about, he goes to sleep in the chair."

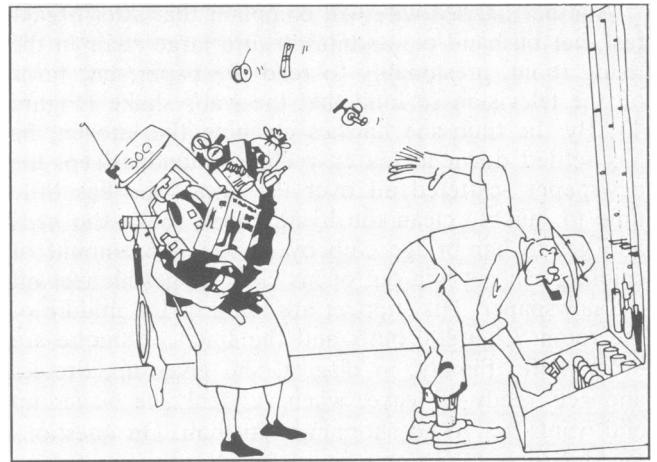


Figure 5.—"He insists I go shopping with him, and the bill for the stuff he bought could have kept us in food, fuel, lights and paid-up taxes for at least two years."

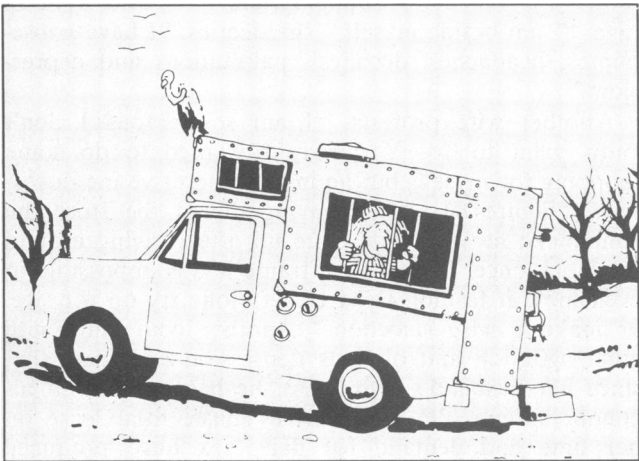


Figure 6.—"He insists I go in the camper with him while he fishes, sometimes for two to three days at a time. After one day, one is mighty tired of picking up his hat to find a place to sit down."

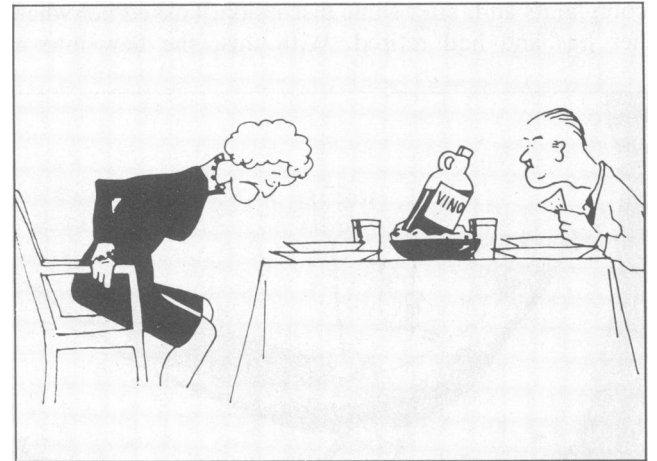


Figure 7.—"Often he wants to do the grocery shopping on my budget, and he brings home cases of beer, Fritos, crackers, potato chips, cigarettes and wine."

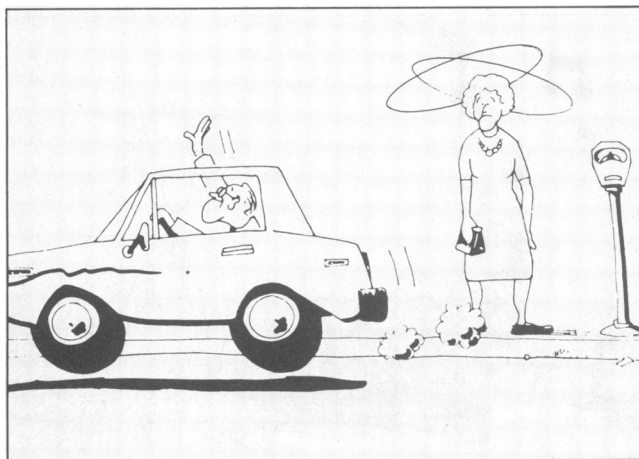


Figure 8.—"After driving me downtown, he left me at the store, said he would drive around the block and then pick me up."

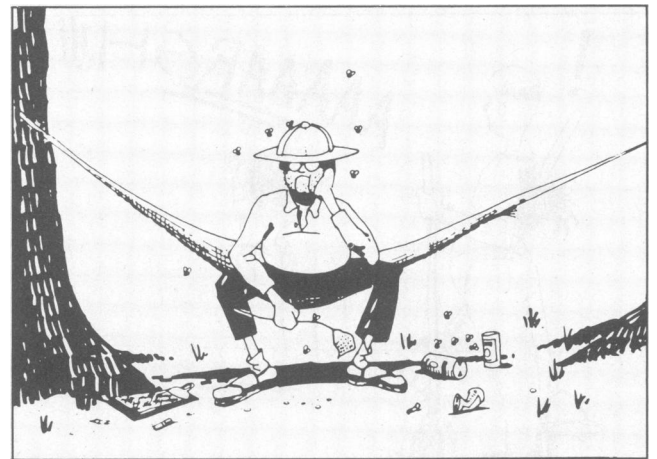


Figure 9.—"He has become an alcoholic, and the verbal abuse I encounter leaves me depressed and ill."

temper and could sulk for hours, and he sees no necessity to make her happy. If she expresses any attempt to get him to do something different from his usual routine, he responds by calling her the world's greatest dummy. Often, he launches into a tirade that may last all evening, one that she has heard at least 100 times previously.

Not infrequently, when a female patient begins to complain of some of the aforementioned symptoms, and she is between 50 and 65 years of age, quite probably she is experiencing symptoms of the "retired husband syndrome." It requires a great deal of sympathy and understanding on the part of a physician and oftentimes involves collaring the husband and convincing him that retirement is not a totally one-sided affair.

It has been said that love cannot be forced but must be earned every day by constant, loving thoughtfulness. There is an old Russian proverb that states, "What you say is drowned out by what you do not do."

Retirement should be a planned program for both spouses with mutual acceptance of both spouses' desires. Also, a productive hobby must usurp a large part of one's day rather than recreation being the major factor in retirement. Happy is the couple who can agree with Browning, who wrote:

Grow old along with me,
The best is yet to be;
The last of life, for which
the first was made.